

# The Military and the Transition to Adulthood

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## Summary

Ryan Kelty, Meredith Kleykamp, and David Segal examine the effect of military service on the transition to adulthood. They highlight changes since World War II in the role of the military in the lives of young adults, focusing especially on how the move from a conscription to an all-volunteer military has changed the way military service affects youths' approach to adult responsibilities.

The authors note that today's all-volunteer military is both career-oriented and family-oriented, and they show how the material and social support the military provides to young servicemen and women promotes responsible membership in family relationships and the wider community. As a result, they argue, the transition to adulthood, including economic independence from parents, is more stable and orderly for military personnel than for their civilian peers. At the same time, they stress that serving in the military in a time of war holds dangers for young adults.

The authors examine four broad areas of military service, focusing in each on how men and women in uniform today make the transition to adulthood. They begin by looking at the social characteristics of those who serve, especially at differences in access to the military and its benefits by socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation.

Military service also has important effects on family formation, including the timing of marriage and parenthood, family structure, and the influence of military culture on families. Family formation among servicemen and women, the authors observe, is earlier and more stable than among civilians of the same age. The authors then consider the educational and employment consequences of service. Finally, they scrutinize the dangers of military service during times of war and examine the physical and psychological effects of wartime military service. They also note the sexual trauma endured both by male and female military personnel and the physical and symbolic violence women can experience in a male-dominated institution.

Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal conclude by seeking policy lessons from the military's success in facilitating the transition to adulthood for young men and women in uniform.

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**M**ilitary service has been characterized as a “moratorium” in the transition to adulthood, a period during which young men and women can defer such adult responsibilities as marriage, childbearing, establishing a household, and acquiring a full-time career.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, for past generations of American conscripts, military service has typically been a pause in the life course, lasting only a few years. But since 1973, as the all-volunteer force has evolved, military service has become less a hiatus in the transition to adulthood and more an experience through which youth become adults. Unlike the nation’s armed forces from World War II through the end of the Vietnam War, today’s military is staffed not by conscripts, but by volunteers, many of whom intend to make military service a career.<sup>2</sup> Not all who volunteer expect to serve for a twenty-year career; many enlist to gain training, skills, or educational benefits to use for college. For them, military service represents a means to achieve future goals.

Military service affects a young man’s or young woman’s transition into adulthood in a wide variety of ways, depending, among other things, on the race, gender, class, and sexual orientation of the service member. Although the military’s extensive social support system facilitates the transition for many, the unique risks of military service can also make that transition seriously problematic. In this article we highlight key ways in which military experience both reflects and influences changes in the transition for these various groups, and we seek policy lessons from how the military facilitates the transition for those who serve. We highlight changes since World War II in the role of the military in the lives of young adults, and we examine changes in

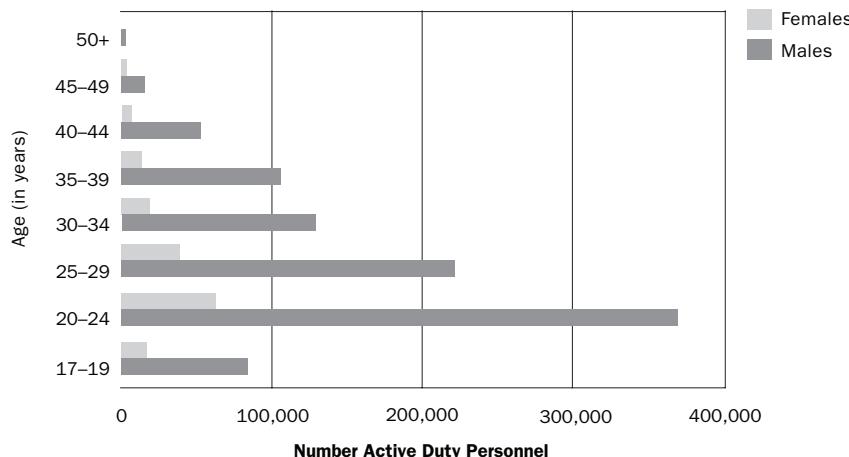
the structure and policies of the armed forces that have contributed to such differences.

In the remainder of this article we examine four broad areas of military service, focusing in each on how men and women in uniform today make the transition to adulthood. First, we look at the social characteristics of those who serve, especially at differences in access to the military and its benefits by socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. Then we explore the effect of military service on family formation, including the timing of marriage and parenthood, family structure, and the influence of military culture on families. Third, we consider the consequences of military service on workforce participation through examining the influence of service on educational and employment outcomes. Finally, we scrutinize the dangers of military service during times of war and examine how the physical and psychological effects of wartime military service and the sexual trauma endured both by male and female military personnel can affect the transition to adulthood. We conclude by considering lessons to be learned from the military approach in facilitating the transition to adulthood.

## Who Serves in the Volunteer Military?

During the era of America’s conscripted military, those who served were (theoretically) a representative sample of the country’s age-eligible, male youth. While there were constraints on who could serve historically, there was always a sense that those who served reflected the society from which they came. The current all-volunteer force relies on market dynamics in conjunction with individuals’ call to service to fill its ranks. Several social-structural characteristics are important in determining not only who serves, but the

Figure 1. Age Distribution of the Military Population, by Gender, 2007



Department of Defense, "Population Representation in the Military Services FY2007" ([www.defenselink.mil/prhome/PopRep2007/index.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/prhome/PopRep2007/index.html) [June 22, 2009]).

experiences they have while in service. In particular, the characteristics of age, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class are important in determining who enlists, what they do, and the experiences they have—all of which influence one's transition to adulthood in the military context.

### Age

Because of its hierarchical nature, its reliance on up-or-out promotion systems with little to no lateral entry, and its demands for physical fitness, military service is often a mission for the young. The age composition of the nation's armed force is far different from that of the civilian labor force. Across all military services, nearly 50 percent of the force is between seventeen and twenty-four years old, as shown in figure 1. The age distribution of men and women in the force is similar, but there is an obvious gender disparity. Although 50 percent of both the men and women serving are under twenty-five, among all service members under twenty-five, roughly 15 percent are women.

This overall portrait of the age distribution obscures differences across the individual services, most notably the Marine Corps' emphasis on maintaining a young, non-career force.<sup>3</sup> As figure 1 also shows, there are slightly more women at the younger ages, and more men at older ages, largely because of gender differences in retention: women leave the military at earlier ages than men, perhaps for family reasons (an issue discussed in greater detail below).

The rigorous and all-encompassing military socialization and training process is not uniquely aimed at young adults, but it is well suited to facilitate economic independence from parents and to promote responsible membership in intimate relationships and communities. The military emphasizes personal responsibility, health, constant training and self-improvement, and community and civic engagement—all key components of a successful transition to adulthood—and it holds all members to the same codes of conduct. Personal growth thus takes place

Table 1. Distribution of Military Experience, by Age and Gender, 2005–07

Percent	No military service	Veteran	National Guard/ reserves only	Active duty
<b>Women</b>				
17–19	99.13	0.13	0.51	0.23
20–24	98.26	0.77	0.51	0.43
25–29	98.00	1.28	0.46	0.26
30–34	97.91	1.40	0.54	0.16
35–39	97.71	1.57	0.58	0.13
40–44	97.48	1.76	0.68	0.08
45–49	97.41	1.83	0.72	0.04
50+	97.52	1.73	0.72	0.03
Total	97.89	1.35	0.58	0.18
<b>Men</b>				
17–19	97.61	0.39	0.91	1.08
20–24	93.80	2.85	0.97	2.37
25–29	92.21	5.42	0.88	1.50
30–34	90.21	7.44	1.17	1.18
35–39	87.63	9.90	1.45	1.02
40–44	85.97	11.73	1.61	0.69
45–49	84.82	13.43	1.44	0.31
50+	83.37	15.23	1.25	0.15
Total	89.63	8.02	1.23	1.13

Source: Authors' calculations from the American Community Survey (ACS) 2005–2007 Datafile.

in a highly structured setting. Within that setting, service members are also secure in knowing that their basic material needs are provided—reasonable wages, generous in-kind transfers, free medical care, housing, educational benefits, and training that may be highly transferable to civilian work.

Although about half of the men and women in the military are between seventeen and twenty-four years of age, only a small fraction of U.S. young adults in that age range has any military experience. Table 1 shows the percentage of the population with military experience, by age and gender. Although men serve at higher rates than women, among both men and women few aged seventeen

to twenty-four have either current or past military experience. Higher rates among older men largely reflect higher service rates among older cohorts, who were at risk of being drafted into the military. Military experience, rare among today's young adults, was more common in earlier generations.

## Gender

Military service has historically been a masculine role, though the share of young women serving in the armed forces has risen significantly since the advent of the all-volunteer force. Legal reforms in 1967, and more recent legal reforms associated with the initiation of the all-volunteer force, lifted official ceilings on women's service (once

capped at 2 percent of the force).<sup>4</sup> In 1973, at the birth of the volunteer force, women made up 1.6 percent of active duty personnel; by 2005, that share had grown to some 15 percent.<sup>5</sup> By September 2008, 20 percent of enlisted personnel and officers in the Air Force were women. The Navy and Army had 15 percent and 14 percent, respectively; the Marine Corps had a significantly smaller share of women—only 6 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Over the past twenty years, women in uniform have increasingly chosen military service as their adult occupation. Their representation in the senior enlisted and officer ranks has grown and now accounts for nearly 12 percent of senior enlisted personnel and officers in all services except the Marine Corps, which is much lower at just over 3 percent.<sup>7</sup>

The military is the only major social institution in the nation that may legally discriminate in employment on the basis of gender. By Army regulation, women may serve “in any... specialty or position except those in battalion size or smaller units which are assigned a primary mission to engage in direct ground combat or which collocate routinely with units assigned a direct ground combat mission.”<sup>8</sup> Women have access to more than 90 percent of the *occupations* in the Army, but are excluded from a number of occupational fields (for example, infantry, armor, special forces), which amount to a third of all Army jobs.<sup>9</sup>

The Navy restricts women from serving aboard submarines, on some small combat-oriented ships, and in support positions with Marine Corps ground combat units.<sup>10</sup> As with the Army, more than 90 percent of Navy positions are open to women.<sup>11</sup> The ability to provide separate berthing on ships by

gender affects the number of women in the fleet; typically, ships have berthing to accommodate women as 20 percent of the crew.<sup>12</sup> In the Marine Corps, more than 90 percent of occupations are open to women—again with exclusions for direct combat-related occupations. However, because the Marines are highly combat-focused, the exclusion of females in these occupations means women are ineligible to serve in 38 percent of all Marine Corps jobs.<sup>13</sup> The Air Force is the least restrictive, with 99 percent of occupational specialties and positions open to women.<sup>14</sup>

Although, as suggested by many of the articles in this volume, women appear to be making more successful transitions to adulthood in many areas than men, the military remains one area where structural and cultural impediments to their advancement remain. The differential treatment of military women at the institutional and interpersonal level affects their transitions to adulthood and the pursuit of military careers in several important ways. First, the exclusions on occupational specialty limit the number of women who can serve and preclude female officers and enlisted personnel from the most prestigious units and jobs in the military. These limits affect service entry and both the rate and height of their ascent in the organization should they choose to remain for a career.<sup>15</sup>

Second, the hyper-masculine culture of the military devalues feminine qualities and characteristics.<sup>16</sup> This devaluation often leads to both physical and symbolic violence against women, a significant source of motivation for women’s leaving military service.<sup>17</sup> Experiences of harassment have led to increased turnover among female service members.<sup>18</sup> Even within the officer corps, sexual harassment has been identified as a

significant motivation for separating from service, though incidences of reported sexual harassment are lower among female officers than among female enlisted personnel.<sup>19</sup> This harassment can escalate to more serious sexual assault, a point we take up later.

Gender as social capital within the military is expressed in assumptions about and direct challenges to women. For example, having particular qualifications (badges and tabs) readily visible on one's uniform is limiting for women, who have fewer opportunities for earning such awards or distinctions. Women have to resort to “pulling rank” more than men to gain compliance from subordinates.<sup>20</sup> Women endure numerous kinds of “tests” (for example, sabotage, constant scrutiny, and indirect threats) that men do not necessarily experience to prove they are capable of serving in the military. Differential treatment of women may be due to the possible Catch-22 of being accused of discrimination on the one hand or being insensitive to real differences in the needs or limitations of women on the other.<sup>21</sup> The result, however, is that different standards can be perceived as inequitable, leading to negative social and professional consequences for female service members. Although career military service is not for everyone, many choose it, and these systematic barriers facing women limit or impede their ability to achieve their military career goals. Because retirement with benefits is possible only after twenty years of service (unless one is injured in the line of duty), the additional stressors placed on women in the military may cause them to leave the service prematurely, with real consequences to the development of their own human capital through schooling, training, and leadership experience and also through potential forfeiture of benefits tied to career service.

Third, mentorship is important in fostering maturation of young professionals. The significant increase in more senior women in both the officer corps and enlisted ranks provides many more role models and mentors to share important social and cultural experiences. Despite persistent challenges, young female service members today have a more supportive and positive environment in the military than at any time in our nation’s history. On balance, the challenges mean that more women than men who enter the service will leave after a short period of service; for these women, their service functions as a transition into other adult occupational, familial, and educational roles rather than a transition to a military career. As we will show, these choices vary by race and ethnicity as well as gender.

### Race and Ethnicity

During the debates on the end of conscription, critics of the volunteer force concept argued that a force recruited through labor market dynamics would place the burden of service disproportionately on the shoulders of economically disadvantaged groups: the poor and racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>22</sup>

The architects of the volunteer force had expected that the end of conscription would not affect the racial composition of the force. However, African American participation in the military increased dramatically during the 1970s and remained around 22 percent from 1980 through 2001. Since the advent of the war on terror, African American participation has declined, dipping below 20 percent in 2006 for the first time in more than a quarter of a century. By contrast, African American participation in the civilian labor force since the late 1970s has remained constant between 11 and 13 percent.<sup>23</sup> Through the 1990s, including the first Persian Gulf War,

the military was consistently able to draw highly capable African American youth. Research on high school graduates shows that blacks are more likely to enlist than whites and that blacks see the military as a viable alternative to the civilian labor force. Highly qualified black youths may prefer the immediate benefits of the military, including its more rigorous meritocratic structure relative to civilian employment options, to advanced education and civilian labor force participation.<sup>24</sup> During the all-volunteer force era, African Americans have consistently been over-represented in the military compared with their presence in the civilian labor force, but that over-representation has been decreasing since the United States began military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nonetheless, for many young African Americans, joining the military is a transition to an adult military role, rather than a step taken before assuming alternative adult roles.

Hispanic participation in the military has risen sharply since the early 1990s. From the inception of the all-volunteer force until 1994, Hispanics made up less than 6 percent of military personnel. Since the late 1980s, Hispanics have increased their share of the military; by 2006, nearly 13 percent of the military identified as Hispanic, more than double the share in 1991.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to African American trends, Hispanic participation in the military mirrors an increase in civilian labor force participation during this time period. When adjusted for those who qualify for military service on the basis of education, Hispanics are actually slightly overrepresented in the military compared with the civilian labor force. Latinos are most likely to enlist in the Marine Corps and least likely to enlist in the Air Force, whereas the Army has the highest share of African American service members and the Marine Corps the lowest.<sup>26</sup>

This difference among branches is consequential for whether military service represents a transition to a military career, or a step toward alternative careers. The Marine Corps has the smallest career force; the Air Force, the largest. The concentration of Hispanics in the former suggests that service will represent a transition to alternate adult roles for young Hispanic men and women.

Immigrants are allowed to serve in the armed forces, and more than 65,000 (both non-citizens and naturalized citizens) do; 11,000 of them are women.<sup>27</sup> Immigrants make up roughly 5 percent of the active duty force. Serving in the military makes immigrants eligible for expedited citizenship, and since 2001 more than 37,000 have become citizens.<sup>28</sup> Some lawmakers have suggested military service as a path to gaining legal status, and the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act introduced in Congress in March 2009 contains provisions allowing illegal immigrants who arrived in the United States before age sixteen a path to citizenship in exchange for two years of military service.<sup>29</sup> Recently, the military has opened opportunities for immigrants on short-term visas, who earlier were not eligible without legal permanent resident status.<sup>30</sup>

Race and gender intersect in important ways in the military. African Americans generally are over-represented, but African American women are more over-represented than men by nearly a 2:1 margin as a share of enlisted soldiers and by more than 2:1 in both officer and warrant officer ranks.<sup>31</sup> Half of the women serving in the military are minority women, with African Americans accounting for 30 percent of all military women.<sup>32</sup> Among Hispanic soldiers, men have historically outnumbered women. In 2006, however, Latinas surpassed Latinos in their representation in

the military in both the enlisted (11.0 percent men, 12.2 percent women) and officer ranks (4.8 percent men, 5.3 percent women).<sup>33</sup>

In 2005, blacks and Hispanics composed 19.9 percent and 9.8 percent of the enlisted ranks, respectively, across all branches of service. Their shares in the officer corps were significantly lower (8.7 percent black, 4.8 percent Hispanic),<sup>34</sup> but reflect the representation of African Americans among the college graduate population, from which officers are drawn. The number of officers of color has increased since the 1990s.<sup>35</sup> Even so, at the highest levels of leadership in the military, racial and ethnic minorities continue to be under-represented. Of the 893 general officers across the four service branches in 2005, only 48 (5.4 percent) were black, and only 11 (1.2 percent) were Hispanic.<sup>36</sup>

Much of the early criticism of the over-representation of minorities in the military was based on their concentration in the combat arms, where, in a conventional war, they would be over-represented among fatalities and casualties. As recently as the 1980s, African Americans were over-represented in units like the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions—among the first units to deploy in wartime. But by 1990, blacks were no longer going disproportionately into combat units.<sup>37</sup> They are now under-represented in combat arms, electronic repair, and electrical and mechanical crafts occupations. By contrast, they are disproportionately serving in functional support, administrative, service, and supply specialties. Although combat occupations may be valued in making a military career, experience in support specialties is highly transferable to the civilian labor market. A recent study found that black men in support occupations had a hiring advantage over civilians, whereas those with combat

experience had minimal success applying for civilian positions.<sup>38</sup> Hispanics more closely resemble whites than they do blacks in their distribution in military specialties. Their highest representation is in the electrical specialty area, followed closely by equal proportions in combat arms and administration. They are more likely than whites to be in medical and dental and other allied health fields, administration, and supply occupations.<sup>39</sup>

### Sexual Orientation

Homosexuals have served in the U.S. military since the Revolutionary War, though they have faced discrimination for much of that time. Gays were prohibited from service from 1950 until January 1993, when President Clinton signed the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” policy on sexual orientation in the military.<sup>40</sup> Thus the gay community did not have the same access to service either as an adult role or as a gateway to other roles as did the straight community. Public opinion does not support banning homosexuals from serving openly in the military. Between 58 and 91 percent of people disapprove of the continued ban.<sup>41</sup>

These shifts in general public opinion are reflected to a lesser degree among military personnel. Military opinions on homosexuals serving openly in uniform have changed dramatically since the early 1990s. Upwards of 40 percent now support such service. Younger service members (both enlisted personnel and officers) offer considerably greater support, suggesting a generation gap in attitudes.<sup>42</sup> Even with marked increases in support for homosexuals among those in and around the military, well over a third of service members report being aware of fellow service members being harassed based on sexual orientation.<sup>43</sup>

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From the early 1980s until 1994, the numbers of discharges for homosexual-related reasons fell. After the passing of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, such discharges rose from 1994, peaking at 1,227 in 2001 (less than 1 percent of the active duty force). Beginning in 2002, the first full year of military operations in the war on terror, discharges under this policy have steadily declined, with 612 service members dismissed in 2006. Since the passing of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, the vast majority of discharges have been triggered by service members' voluntarily admitting being homosexual.<sup>44</sup> Many observers question the equity of the policy's enforcement, arguing that in times of crisis, such as the war on terror, the military is much less likely to discharge for homosexuality because of manpower needs. Even so, there has been considerable public debate over the dismissal of homosexual service members, especially Arabic linguists, in recent years. Those who oppose the policy argue that it violates human rights and the

U.S. Constitution and that it defines homosexuals as second-class citizens—the latter a claim made in the past by African Americans and currently by women. During the 2008 presidential election campaign, Barack Obama promised to lift the ban on gays openly serving in the American military. Such a step would help pave the way for more young gays and lesbians to serve in the armed forces either as a career or as a transition to other adult roles.

### Social Class

According to data from the National Longitudinal Study of the high school graduating class of 1972, men and women serving in the volunteer military did not come from the underclass of American society, but did come from somewhat lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and had somewhat lower academic performance, than their peers who did not serve. Officers performed better in high school and came from higher-status socioeconomic backgrounds than did enlisted personnel. African Americans were over-represented among those who served, primarily because they are over-represented in less affluent social strata.<sup>45</sup> The bottom quartile of the socioeconomic distribution was under-represented in the military, largely because of the educational, physical, mental aptitude, and moral<sup>46</sup> requirements for service. The top quartile was under-represented primarily because of self-selection. The force was thus manned by the middle range of the socioeconomic distribution, with a mean somewhat below that of the broader society. According to the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future project, these patterns continued at least through the first two decades of the volunteer force among high school graduates. Enlistment was higher among blacks and Hispanics than among whites, among men from single-parent

households, among those whose parents had lower levels of education, and among those who did not plan to attend college.<sup>47</sup> High school students with C grade averages were found to be approximately two times as likely to enter military service as their peers with A grade averages.<sup>48</sup> Thus, although military service might be playing a larger role in the transition to adulthood for women and for racial and ethnic minorities than it did in the past, and might do so in the future for homosexuals, it is less inclusive across the socioeconomic spectrum than it was during periods of wartime conscription.

## The Transition to Family Roles

During the conscription era, the military was composed primarily of single young men. Men tended to postpone marriage and fatherhood until after their military service or, at times, to get married to avoid conscription. In either case, military service was decoupled from family roles. To the extent that the transition to adulthood in the past involved family formation, then military service often delayed that transition. Indeed, into the 1980s, it was still common for Army personnel managers to note, “If the Army wanted you to have a wife, it would have issued you one.” Today’s volunteer force is older, more career-oriented, and more family-oriented. Policy makers have recognized that the modern military still recruits individuals for the most part, but it retains—or fails to retain—families. Military roles and familial roles are now more closely coupled, and the military and its policies have evolved in response.

## Marriage

The number of service members who are married increased after the advent of the all-volunteer force, as did the number of dual-service couples with both partners serving in uniform. The growth in marriage rates has

not been linear. The share of enlisted soldiers who are married climbed from 40 percent in 1973 to its height at 57 percent in 1994. After declining and then rising again over the next ten years, the share married in 2005 was 52 percent.<sup>49</sup>

In 2002, nearly 12 percent of marriages among service members involved dual-service unions. Although only 7 percent of married enlisted men were married to women who also served, 49 percent of married enlisted women were married to men in uniform. Proportions are similar among officers for both genders.<sup>50</sup> The significant difference in dual-service marriage rates by sex is due in part to the under-representation of women in the military.

Military personnel are slightly more likely than their civilian peers to be married, though they are less likely than their age peers to be married when they enter the military.<sup>51</sup> They enter single, but marry young. Military service is more closely coupled to the husband and father role than to the wife and mother role. Women (enlisted and officers) are less likely to be married than their male counterparts.<sup>52</sup> Data from 2002 suggest that men in the junior enlisted ranks are nearly twice as likely to be married as civilians aged eighteen to twenty-four years.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, racial differences in family formation in the civilian population are absent in the military; the tremendous black-white gap in marriage among civilians is virtually non-existent within the military.<sup>54</sup>

Military divorce rates differ by gender, race, and rank. In 2005, marital dissolution rates (per 100, per annum) among men were nearly twice as high for enlisted (2.8) as for officers (1.5). Among women, that rate was more than twice as high for enlisted (7.3)

as for officers (3.6). In both cases, the rates among women are significantly higher than among men, but especially among enlisted personnel.<sup>55</sup> Starting and maintaining a marriage appears to be most challenging for military women.

During the early years of the volunteer force, the divorce rate was higher among enlisted military personnel than among their civilian counterparts—in part because military personnel marry at an earlier age.<sup>56</sup> Relationships between race and divorce rates also ran counter to civilian patterns. Although African American civilians have higher divorce rates than white civilians, the pattern was reversed in the military. White enlistees were half—again as likely as white civilians to divorce, while black enlistees were more than 10 percent less likely to divorce than black civilians were. Jennifer Lundquist attributes the closing of the racial gap in marital dissolution within the military to an equalizing of the constraints faced by families in the military.<sup>57</sup> Military men are less likely to be divorced than their age-matched civilian counterparts, while women in uniform are significantly more likely to be divorced than their civilian counterparts.<sup>58</sup> Among service members older than twenty-five, there are large proportional differences for women versus men in first marriages. The share of military women in their first marriage is consistently lower than their civilian age-matched peers—the reverse pattern of that found among military and civilian men. In particular, older service women (ages forty to forty-nine) are approximately half as likely to be in their first marriage (27.2 percent) as are civilian women of the same age group (49.2 percent).<sup>59</sup>

Despite the stressors associated with deployments, there was no strong evidence before the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that

deployments negatively affect marriage. Current research based on deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan shows that deployments may actually strengthen military marriages while the military member is on active duty.<sup>60</sup> Recent findings show that once service members leave the military, their divorce rates are higher than those of their civilian peers. The military appears able to buffer against the stressors on marriages while individuals remain in service, but once the structures and support of the military are removed, veterans' marriages suffer.<sup>61</sup>

Many stressors experienced by military families may contribute to the observed marital patterns: financial stress, spouse employment, housing and neighborhood quality (off-post), access to services, separation from the social support networks of family and friends, frequent relocations, and risk of death and injury.<sup>62</sup>

Military service also has potential benefits for marriage. Supportive family policies, a supportive community, and professional development opportunities to improve human capital through training, education, and leadership opportunities can improve financial opportunities (through promotions and post-service work), as well as personal growth. Each of these outcomes may improve the resilience of marriages and family solidarity more generally.<sup>63</sup> Evidence also suggests that the suite of benefits available to military personnel and their families buffers against some of the stressors known to increase marital dissolution in the civilian population.<sup>64</sup> The Army provides marriage enrichment programs, often run by Army chaplains as well as “exceptional family member” programs to provide additional assistance (often in the form of preference in desired duty location and housing) to families with

special-needs members. Military housing policy is especially favorable to married couples and families with children. Single service members may be required to live in common facilities like barracks, while married soldiers may reside in apartments or houses with their spouses, on or off military installations. Ironically, marriage may provide more freedoms to service members by allowing them independent households as opposed to remaining single and living in barracks or dormitories, and housing policies may in fact encourage early marriage and childbearing behaviors.

### Childbearing

Nearly three-quarters of married military personnel have dependent children, though women in uniform are less likely than are men to have children.<sup>65</sup> The Department of Health and Human Services found that military and civilian men had nearly identical mean ages at the birth of their first child (25.0 and 25.1 years, respectively). However, mean age at the birth of first child was 1.5 years younger for military women than for civilian women (23.6 and 25.1 years, respectively).<sup>66</sup> This difference in part reflects the earlier age at first marriage among military women, perhaps because of the volunteer force's family-friendly policies.<sup>67</sup> Couples in dual-service marriages are less likely than single-service couples to have children.<sup>68</sup> Among all active-duty personnel regardless of marital status, 44 percent of the servicemen and women have dependent children. Comparable proportions of black men (53 percent) and women (52 percent) in uniform have children. White men (44 percent) are more likely to have children than white women (33 percent), matched by similar shares of Hispanic men (42 percent) and women (34 percent).<sup>69</sup>

Although deployments and frequent absences might suggest an unfriendly climate for childbearing and rearing, military policies are relatively pro-natal. Free medical care, housing policies based on family size, good schools on military installations, robust systems of organized youth sports and activities, and available and affordable child care support early childbearing and larger families. They also support single parents; more than 13 percent of Army women and roughly 6 percent of Army men are single parents. While custodial single parents are prohibited from enlisting, men and women who become single parents after joining can remain in the service.<sup>70</sup>

A key support for raising children in military families is the military child care system. Nearly all Child Development Centers are accredited, compared with only 8 percent of civilian providers.<sup>71</sup> Although the program is the largest employer-provided child care program in the nation, the capacity to serve all those needing care is still limited. In 2000, the military system covered only 58 percent of the need for child care spots.<sup>72</sup> And although more spouses prefer to use military child care, those using civilian services were more satisfied.<sup>73</sup>

### The Influence of Military Culture on Families

If the military recruits individuals but retains families, then family members are important stakeholders affected by military policies and culture. Military culture pressures family members to conform because the actions of one's family reflect on the service member. The pressure is felt by spouses and children, but especially by officers' wives, who engage in a variety of volunteer activities, such as family readiness groups, youth activities, and unit social events, to support the community, in particular their husbands' units.<sup>74</sup> The

military has a long history of hyper-masculine traditions that manifest themselves in both overt and subtle ways. Nevertheless, its adoption of family-friendly policies seems to have encouraged and supported family formation and growth, perhaps at the expense of spousal employment or educational advancement. Working military spouses have lower employment rates and lower wages than comparable non-military spouses.<sup>75</sup> Ironically, progress made by the military toward gender equality in some senses has outpaced gender equality in families. That the military allows women to do most of the things that men do, while society (and the military) still expects women to play the major role in childrearing, makes it difficult for women on active military duty to meet the demands at the intersection of the roles. Thus, military women are more likely to divorce or to leave active duty.

Children in military families are exposed to the lifestyle and culture of their respective service branch, especially if they live on military installations surrounded by other military families. These children learn to cope with parental absence and frequent moves, and most adapt successfully to the demands of military life, but parent absence and frequent moves have been shown to hamper children's academic achievement.<sup>76</sup>

One characteristic of military culture is relative race-neutrality. The race-friendly environment leads to less racial segregation in housing, education, and socializing, which in turn contributes to lower racial gaps in test scores among military children than in civilian society. Black-white gaps in SAT scores are 30 percent lower in Department of Defense schools, and gaps in elementary reading and writing test scores are half those found in civilian schools.<sup>77</sup>

*Military culture pressures family members to conform because the actions of one's family reflect on the service member. The pressure is felt by spouses and children, but especially by officers' wives.*

Finally, the constant exposure to military life often leads to an intergenerational transmission of service; children of service members disproportionately serve in the military. The rate of voluntary military service from the high school graduating class of 1972 was twice as high among sons of career military fathers as among sons of civilian families, and these military sons had double the rate of interest in a military career for themselves.<sup>78</sup> More recently, scholars have found that children with a parent currently serving in the military were more likely to join the military.<sup>79</sup>

**Education, Civilian Labor Force Participation, and Military Service**  
 Educational benefits from various forms of the GI Bill are a hallmark of the benefits package for those who serve in the armed forces. The GI Bill is available to all service members who are honorably discharged, though service members may opt out of this benefit. Only a small number of service members choose to opt out, and many who do contribute from their paycheck to GI benefits do not end up using the educational benefits they accrue. An updated version of the GI Bill, the "Post 9/11 GI Bill," provides those who served on or after September 11,

2001, with an enhanced educational benefits package. The new package provides more money toward tuition and books, as well as a living allowance; for the first time it allows service members to transfer unused educational benefits to their spouse or children.<sup>80</sup> Since the inception in 1944 of the GI Bill, the educational benefits tied to military service have channeled large numbers of veterans into higher education. Because military service and higher education are typically pursued at similar points in the life course, young military veterans may have lower levels of educational attainment than peers who go straight into college. Access to military educational benefits from the GI Bill provides some veterans with an opportunity to attend college after military service.

Veterans of World War II, Korea, and the post-Korea cold war attained higher educational levels than comparable non-veterans, facilitated by their access to generous educational benefits provided by the first GI Bill of Rights. Because of the scale of those wars and the support they received from the American public, relatively high numbers of men served who were not only well positioned to attend college, but also were well received on college campuses following their service. However, male veterans of the Vietnam era, the last conscription-based war, achieved lower levels of education than their peers who did not serve.<sup>81</sup> The discrepancy may partly stem from draft policies exempting college students from military service. These policies generated more college-educated non-veterans than veterans and may have induced some to enroll in college to avoid being drafted.<sup>82</sup> At the same time, educational benefits for the non-military population were expanded and became more widely available.<sup>83</sup> Further, anti-war sentiment on the home front during the 1960s and 1970s, especially among the youth

and those in academia, made many campuses a hostile environment for Vietnam veterans. The Vietnam-era pattern persisted, according to the National Longitudinal Survey, at least through the first decade of the volunteer force. Veterans of the volunteer force lagged educationally behind their peers who did not serve.<sup>84</sup> Although veterans earn benefits to attend college after their service, they may not be able to take full advantage of their benefits to attain the same levels of education as their peers who immediately pursue higher education. It is difficult to serve in the military and pursue higher education at the same time, and the longer they served, the more they fell behind their peers' attainment. Those who serve longer are also more likely to be married and have children, which may constrain the decision to return to school post-service.

The education gap observed during the 1970s between veterans and those who did not serve existed for both black and white veterans and for both genders.<sup>85</sup> Although black veterans showed increased educational attainment over the life course, the gains were not sufficiently strong to meet or exceed the educational attainment of blacks who did not serve. At the intersection of race and gender, African American women veterans did not differ significantly from white women veterans in terms of years of education or the share earning a college degree, although among non-veterans, white women are more likely to earn college degrees than are black women.<sup>86</sup> The better schooling of civilian men may have been due in part to increases during the 1960s in federal aid for higher education not tied to military service, or it may be a function of the disruptive effect of military service on educational pursuits and stagnation (or reduction) in veterans' educational benefits in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Most people who join the military do not make it a career. For them, military service is a transition between high school and higher education or the civilian workforce. Even for the minority who choose the military as an opportunity for extended service or a career, the military retirement system, which vests benefits after twenty years of service, and the premium placed on youth by the traditional military culture, mean that virtually all military personnel will leave the service too young and with too small a pension to retire fully. They are thus likely, also, to transition to civilian work roles.

The military offers its most junior enlisted personnel higher pay and better benefits than are available to civilian age-matched peers. Once individuals leave the military, these relative benefits decrease over time. Non-white men maintain slightly higher earnings than their civilian peers over time, but white veterans eventually earn less in their subsequent civilian lives than their counterparts who did not serve.<sup>87</sup> By contrast, as veterans, officers earn a 10 percent wage premium over their non-veteran peers.<sup>88</sup>

The military's pay and benefits structure, which is based on rank and years in service, is a much fairer employment environment than the civilian labor market in terms of monetary and non-monetary compensation. The pay gap between white and African American service members is significantly smaller than that between white and black civilians.<sup>89</sup> This relative pay equity is a major reason why African American women are disproportionately represented in the armed services. Not only does the military promote and compensate racial minorities more fairly than the civilian sector, it also compensates men and women much more evenly. Differences in pay by race and gender do exist, but the gap

is considerably narrower than it is in the civilian labor market.

According to contemporary studies of the civilian workforce outcomes of veterans from the all-volunteer force that examine differences by race and gender, the share of women veterans with a bachelor's degree (14 percent) in 1990 was approximately one-third that of women who had never served in uniform.<sup>90</sup> Women veterans, both whites and blacks, also had higher jobless rates than non-serving women in 1990.<sup>91</sup> Women veterans were estimated to have 12.5 percent less in earnings and 11.7 percent less in family income than comparable women with no military service. These negative effects on women's earnings and family income are the unique contribution of military service once the effects of education and race have been accounted for.

By 2005, however, women veterans were earning approximately \$7,000 more each year than female non-veterans. Much of the difference in earnings between female veterans and non-veterans is attributable to the fact that female veterans work more during the year than their non-serving female peers. Although women of both veteran and non-veteran status are equally likely to work year-round, female veterans are nearly one and a half times as likely to work full-time as non-veteran women.

Male veterans in 2005 also outperformed their civilian counterparts on earnings, but only by \$3,000 a year.<sup>92</sup> White veterans' earnings, however, lag behind those of their non-serving peers for the first few years after separation from service.<sup>93</sup> African American and Hispanic veterans consistently fare better than white veterans relative to each group's non-serving counterparts.<sup>94</sup> Thus, the later

life income benefit to military service is greatest for racial and ethnic minorities.

## The Risks of Military Service

Although the military provides numerous supports for a successful transition to adulthood, the physical and psychological risks of service, which are amplified during wartime, may harm interpersonal relationships and diminish independence, thus imperiling the transition. In addition, many military women face sexual harassment and sexual abuse during their service. Indeed, the post-traumatic stress experiences that men (and women) face from combat parallel the pervasive traumatic sexual experiences of women, even in peacetime. These risks may carry over to military families, and spouses and children likely suffer poorer outcomes when their family member experiences any of these negative events.

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*Extrapolation of these findings produces an estimate that 300,000 of the service members deployed in support of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD or major depression and that another 320,000 suffer probable traumatic brain injury.*

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## Physical and Mental Health Effects of Service

The nature of military service, especially during war, exposes those who serve to potential physical and mental health disabilities. Through January 3, 2009, the Department

of Defense had reported 30,934 wounded in Iraq and another 2,627 in Afghanistan.<sup>95</sup> The most likely causes of physical injury are improvised explosive devices (IEDs), followed by artillery and gunshot.<sup>96</sup> Two of the major physical injuries suffered by personnel in current engagements are traumatic amputations and burns. As of August 1, 2008, more than 1,200 service members had suffered amputations—nearly three-quarters of which were major limb amputations.<sup>97</sup> Several hundred more had suffered serious burn wounds.<sup>98</sup>

The “invisible wounds” of cognitive and psychological trauma among service members are also major health outcome concerns. Traumatic brain injury had been diagnosed in more than 8,000 service members as of January 2009. The vast majority (88 percent) of these traumatic brain injuries were classified as “mild,” and most were the result of exposure to blasts such as improvised explosive devices.<sup>99</sup>

Depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide are three of the biggest mental health concerns. A recent report found that 14 percent of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan screened positive for major depression, and the same share screened positive for PTSD.<sup>100</sup> Similar data are reported from those working with the office of the Army Surgeon General—an estimated 12 percent of soldiers with anxiety and depression disorders after first deployment, rising to an estimated 27 percent after a third deployment.<sup>101</sup> Ground troops (soldiers and Marines) are more likely to report PTSD and depression than are sailors and airmen; women, enlisted personnel, Hispanics, and those not on active duty (Guard, Reserve, retired) are the most likely to report PTSD and depression.<sup>102</sup> Among 300,000 service

members surveyed, 19 percent reported suffering a probable traumatic brain injury. Extrapolation of these findings produces an estimate that 300,000 of the service members deployed in support of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD or major depression and that another 320,000 suffer probable traumatic brain injury.<sup>103</sup>

Suicide rates among military personnel are typically lower than civilian rates. In 2008, for the first time since Vietnam, the rate of suicides in the Army (128 deaths, or about 20 deaths per 100,000 soldiers) surpassed the rate among the civilian population.<sup>104</sup> Male veterans are twice as likely as their non-veteran peers to die by suicide. White veterans are more likely than blacks to die by suicide.<sup>105</sup> Suicide among service members and veterans is strongly related to PTSD, major depression, traumatic brain injury, and limitations in daily activities.<sup>106</sup> The cognitive and psychological wounds suffered by service members in Iraq and Afghanistan may produce psychological mortality surpassing the number of combat deaths in the war on terror.<sup>107</sup> The cognitive injuries suffered by service members are likely to impair their transitions to civilian work, their relationships with family and friends, and their broader life trajectories.

Service members report alarming failures to receive treatment for their cognitive and psychological disorders. Nearly half report seeking psychological treatment or counseling help for PTSD or major depression. Forty three percent of those who suspected that they had a traumatic brain injury were never seen by medical professionals for that condition.<sup>108</sup> The culture of the military (an extension of civilian culture in America) discourages people from seeking medical help for cognitive and psychological disorders.

Fear of negative effects on careers, personal stigmatization, and potential loss of peers' confidence are cited as major reasons to avoid professional help.<sup>109</sup> The negative implications for future health (including substance abuse and suicide), work outcomes, and relationship success (especially in families) of these high incidences of non-treatment for cognitive and psychological trauma cannot be overstated.<sup>110</sup>

### **Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault**

Sexual harassment and sexual assault affect many men and women in the United States, both within the military and in the civilian population. The issue has been given much more attention in the military in recent decades. Comparing sexual harassment and assault among civilians and military groups is challenging because reporting requirements differ between the two populations. Comparisons over time within the military are also complicated because the military has changed its reporting format several times in recent years. Still, it is possible to reach a fairly clear understanding of the extent and impact of such events on current military personnel and veterans.

Although both men and women in the military experience sexual harassment and sexual assault—referred to as military sexual trauma (MST)—rates are much higher among women. In 2006, one-third of women and 6 percent of men in uniform reported being sexually harassed, and 6.8 percent of military women and 1.8 percent of military men reported being sexually assaulted. Junior enlisted personnel were most likely to report military sexual trauma. Of the four branches, service members in the Army were most likely, and those in the Air Force least likely, to report such trauma.<sup>111</sup> The rate of sexual trauma among female veterans is estimated

in the range of low 20 percent to low 30 percent.<sup>112</sup> The rate among male veterans is estimated at between 2 and 4 percent.<sup>113</sup>

Military sexual trauma impairs both physical and mental health. In 2007, the Veterans Health Administration found that women veterans who reported sexual trauma also presented with symptoms of PTSD, dissociative disorders, eating disorders, and personality disorders. Male veterans who reported sexual trauma had high rates of dissociative and personality disorders. Men were significantly more likely than women to be diagnosed with adjustment disorders. Both male and female victims of sexual trauma are more likely to be diagnosed with alcohol and anxiety disorders than are their same-sex veteran peers who did not experience such trauma; for both disorders, the association was stronger among women.<sup>114</sup>

The risk of developing PTSD from sexual trauma is at least as high as, if not higher than, the risk of developing PTSD from exposure to combat.<sup>115</sup> Among veterans, sexually traumatized women are nearly three times more likely than men to be diagnosed with PTSD. Women veterans who experience military sexual trauma are also up to five times more likely to develop PTSD than women who experience civilian sexual trauma.<sup>116</sup>

Behaviors associated with sexual trauma, such as substance abuse and risky behavior, expose these veterans to such physical health risks as liver disease, chronic lung disease, weight-related disorders, and HIV/AIDS. In addition, veterans who are sexually harassed or assaulted while in uniform attempt suicide or intentionally harm themselves at more than twice the rate of veterans without exposure to sexual trauma.<sup>117</sup>

For those who experience injury, either mental or physical, as a result of their service, or for those who suffer military sexual trauma, there is a high probability that their military service will be a serious interruption in the transition to adulthood. Personal relationships, careers, education, and in some cases physical independence are likely to suffer as a direct result of their military service. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have highlighted the physical and emotional risks of combat service, and the pervasive sexual harassment and assault military women experience also places them at particular risk of interrupted or unsuccessful transitions to adulthood.

## Lessons for Civilian Policy

Do the military policies that contribute to a successful transition to adulthood hold lessons for civilian policy makers? Because the institutional structure of the military, including the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which codifies behavioral expectations, does not translate to civilian life, many military policies are not directly applicable in the civilian world. But some aspects of the military's approach may be successfully adapted for use in civilian policy making.

Those who choose a military career enjoy almost ideal employment relations—generous benefits, job security with regulated promotion rules, and a generous pension after twenty years of service. In exchange for long hours, dangerous conditions, and frequent deployment from home, career men and women in service receive child care, health benefits, and housing—supports that minimize but do not eliminate the challenges of raising a family in the military. By contrast, young adults pursuing civilian work face uncertain employment and wages, eroding benefits, and volatile housing markets, all of

which likely delay family formation and challenge childrearing during these early years. The military benefits do not come without a cost or without risk, but they clearly provide an integrated web of institutional support for service members and their families.

Even though the all-volunteer force has become more a career force than the military was before the early 1970s, most who join still serve only a short time, typically four years. Those who serve for a limited period often do so to gain training, experience, discipline, or to earn the now-generous GI Bill educational benefits. For these youth, service represents an active transition to adulthood—a means to acquire an adult role—rather than a mere pause between adolescence and adulthood. Earlier generations of young adults who served may indeed have used military service as a “time out,” moratorium, or pause in the transition to adulthood because their service was involuntary. Being conscripted into the military interrupted the plans and trajectories of these young people. But voluntary military service is part of a planned course into adulthood. The same institutional supports for marriage, childbearing, occupational attainment, and education that are available to career service members are also available to those who serve for shorter periods. These supports far exceed those available in the world of college or of work.

Sometimes the military is seen as one of a handful of “second-chance” institutions poised to help disadvantaged youth get back on track to a successful transition to adulthood. Fairly stringent enlistment criteria disqualify many who need a second chance—those with criminal records, those in poor health, and those who drop out of high school. Some policy researchers have suggested using military service as the equivalent of a

jobs or welfare program, but early experiments admitting into the military individuals who did not meet standard enlistment criteria were not successful, because they were implemented in a way that made these soldiers easy to identify and targets of differential treatment.<sup>118</sup> In recent years, changing force sizes have led to varying enlistment standards. Although these variations provide a natural experiment on how military service affects men and women accepted under relaxed standards, such analyses have yet to be conducted. An earlier natural experiment resulting from the misnorming of the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) in 1976–80 found that the 400,000 individuals inadvertently admitted during the misnorming period performed more poorly than higher-aptitude peers.<sup>119</sup> Indeed, these low-aptitude recruits partly contributed to the characterization of the military at that time as a “hollow force.”<sup>120</sup> In short, although military service does have the capacity to change those who serve, some of the positive outcomes are attributable to the selection process that screens out those least likely to succeed, a key lesson for policy makers interested in appropriating military models.

Quasi-military programs, public military academies, and JROTC programs in schools have recently become popular, especially in areas with large populations of vulnerable youth, and they appear to be successful. In an evaluation focusing on JROTC Career Academies (programs within traditional schools), students participating in the JROTC programs had higher grade point averages, lower absenteeism, and higher high school graduation rates than those not participating.<sup>121</sup> A recent ethnographic study of a public military academy suggests that such a model (where all students are cadets) may hold promise largely because of the military

like solidarity it promotes.<sup>122</sup> The National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program focuses on high school dropouts, also using a military-inspired model. The program provides an initial socialization phase similar to boot camp, a residential program of life skills, academic work, and physical fitness, followed by a post-residential placement into a job or further education.<sup>123</sup> After tough initial socialization, the residential phase emphasizes isolation from negative peer influences and focuses on discipline, leadership and followership, fitness and health, and academic, civic, and social education. Early results from a random-assignment demonstration show positive outcomes: the treatment group was more likely to have earned a GED (46 percent of the program group versus 10 percent of the control group earned a diploma or GED), to be working or attending college (30 percent versus 21 percent working full time, 11 percent vs. 3 percent in college), and less likely to report being arrested (14 percent versus 20 percent). The program evaluation is ongoing, but initial findings suggest the military model is helping high school dropouts in the transition to adulthood.

Military service plays a key role in the transition to adulthood for those who do serve, but two aspects of military service in the contemporary environment will likely be increasingly relevant. First, because of the occupational heritability of military service, the trends in military family policies we discuss have implications for the transition to adulthood of the next generation. Children growing up in today's military are exposed to the relatively pro-family policies and social environment of the military that may intensify the inter-generational transmission of military service. Second, military-connected trauma and disability can generate long-lasting effects on the life trajectories of those affected. There is often a substantial delay in the diagnosis of a service-related trauma or disability as well, implying yet more individuals whose lives may be negatively affected by their service in years to come. Thus, the health sequelae, like the educational and employment consequences of service, will be with veterans for the duration of their life course, not just during the transition to adulthood.

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